

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

## DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

German Language and Literature Papers

Modern Languages and Literatures, Department  
of

---

1-1-1992

### Review of Wolfgang Wittkowski, ed., *Revolution und Autonomie: Deutsche Autonomieästhetik im Zeitalter der Französischen Revolution. Ein Symposium.*

Priscilla A. Hayden-Roy

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, [phayden-roy1@unl.edu](mailto:phayden-roy1@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlanggerman>



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

Hayden-Roy, Priscilla A., "Review of Wolfgang Wittkowski, ed., *Revolution und Autonomie: Deutsche Autonomieästhetik im Zeitalter der Französischen Revolution. Ein Symposium.*" (1992). *German Language and Literature Papers*. 7.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlanggerman/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in German Language and Literature Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in *The German Quarterly* 65 (Winter 1992), pp. 66–67.

<http://germanquarterly.aatg.org/>

Published by the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG),  
112 Haddontowne Ct. #104, Cherry Hill, NJ 08034-3668 USA.

Copyright © 1992 American Association of Teachers of German.

Used by permission.

*Revolution und Autonomie: Deutsche Autonomieästhetik im Zeitalter der Französischen Revolution. Ein Symposium.* Ed. Wolfgang Wittkowski. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1990. 389 pp. DM 148.

This volume is the last of five in a series edited by Wolfgang Wittkowski and based on symposia held at SUNY-Albany on various aspects of German Classicism. The topic of this last symposium—esthetic autonomy—fairly bristles with controversy, as historically it has formed a dividing line of sorts between ideological camps within German literary scholarship. Beginning with the *Bildungsbürgertum* of the 19th century, esthetic autonomy came to be defined as the mark of highest literary quality, defined formally in terms of closure, self-containment and “perfection,” and restricted in terms of content to the apolitical, “purely esthetic” realm. On the other hand, from Heine to the Marxists, Neo-Marxists, and the New Left, esthetic autonomy has frequently been viewed as a compensation for the political impotence of the German *Bürgertum*—one more manifestation of “deutsche Innerlichkeit.” The essays in this volume attempt to situate the concept of esthetic autonomy in its historical context, the period of the French Revolution, in order to come to a better understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in this period.

The volume gives the reader a bird’s-eye view of the symposium: twenty essays by prominent Germanists from North America and Europe, followed by 204 pages of discussion, and finally a protocol of the concluding discussion led by Walter Hinck. Wittkowski has also provided the volume with an introduction. Representing a broad range of theme and opinion, the articles treat the concept of esthetic autonomy in terms of its impact on literary production (beginning with the *Sturm und Drang* and working up to the early Romantics), and as a theoretical concept. While most of the articles focus on either Goethe or Schiller, also included are contributions on Ulrich Bräcker’s reception of Shakespeare (Christa Fell), Herder’s view of Greek art in light of his historicism (Martin Bollacher), Jean Paul’s aesthetics (Wulf Koepke), Hölderlin’s esthetic absolute (Friedrich Strack), Novalis’s “Glauben und Liebe” (Dennis Mahoney), antirevolutionary jour-

nals in Germany (Helga Brandes), and the influence of revolutionary slogans—freedom, democracy, equality—on the poetological conception of the novel in the late eighteenth century (Hartmut Steinecke). Articles on Goethe cover the whole span of his literary production, including such topics as the influence of Gottfried Arnold's concept of "heretic" in Goethe's turn to literature in the *Sturm und Drang* period (Eitel Timm); autonomy of character and form in *Egmont*, *Iphigenie*, and *Tasso* (Hans Reiss); the variety of aesthetic views, including aesthetic autonomy, articulated in *Tasso* (Günter Niggel); the subordination of text to music in the *Singspiele* (Ferdinand van Ingen); two paradigms of autonomy: the Promethean genius represented by the young Goethe, and the platonic idea of the beautiful as found in Hölderlin (Dieter Bremer); and the multiplicity of autonomies in *Faust II* (Wolfgang Wittkowski).

With the exception of Klaus Gerth's discussion of drama in the *Sturm und Drang*, articles on Schiller deal primarily with the theory of aesthetic autonomy, and thus form a point of focus within the volume. Klaus Berghahn discusses how the Weimar concept of aesthetic autonomy developed in polemical response to a number of forces: the French Revolution, the tendency towards *Volkstümlichkeit* among writers such as Bürger, and the pragmatic literary program of the Enlightenment. Goethe and Schiller formulated elitist aesthetic standards in the *Horen* that isolated them from their public. Speaking what they called the 'language of humanity,' they paradoxically wrote their poetry "mit dem Rücken zum Publikum." In what might be the most interesting article in the volume, Bernd Bräutigam discusses the Kantian background of Schiller's concept of autonomy in order to show how it responds to Rousseau's criticism of art as compensation. He observes that "autonomy" designates not an arbitrary positing of law (autarchy or sovereignty), but rather the "Selbstgesetzgebung eines Gemeinwesens in Anerkennung einer übergreifenden Rechtsordnung" (247)—an important distinction in differentiating between late eighteenth-century aesthetic autonomy and its modern counterpart, *l'art pour l'art*. Articles by Walter Sokel and Dieter Borchmeyer also emphasize the Kantian, legal origins of Schiller's concept of autonomy. Sokel discusses the political function of the aesthetic experience in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung* ... as sublimation: in contemplating the beautiful, one's physical desires are redirected,

one learns to see the other not as a means of satisfying drives, but as a "Selbstzweck," whose freedom should be respected. The 'botschaftslose Autonomie' of art alone guarantees that it serve this moral-political purpose (272). Borchmeyer argues similarly that Schiller's notion of autonomous art does not imply a depoliticization of art, but rather is derived from the idea of political autonomy and serves as a symbol of the same (283). Walter Hinck discusses the priestly role of the poet in Schiller's philosophical poetry. In "Die Künstler" Schiller posits art as the educator of mankind and the telos of science (in contrast to the early Enlightenment view of poetry serving science). Aesthetic autonomy thus must be understood in the context of the secularization of religion in the late eighteenth century, where art, as mediator of truth, is assigned a quasi-religious function within human history. David Pugh addresses the tension between aesthetic and ethical autonomy in Schiller, which is resolved in the *Kallias* letters by making beauty the symbol of moral autonomy.

In the concluding discussion, participants agreed that the confusion concerning the concept of aesthetic autonomy has arisen in large part because of the accretions of meaning (particularly the notion of the apolitical, hermetically sealed artwork), which, when projected back on the 18th century, lead to gross distortions. In this context, Brautigam's suggestion to launch a large-scale undertaking similar to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* or the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* for important terms in literary studies (370) seems sensible. The historical focus of the symposium, evident in Wittkowski's concluding statement: "Der Begriff der autonomen Kunst ist ein historisches Ereignis als theoretisches Konzept und als Kunstpraxis in einem historischen Augenblick, in dem 'Autonomie' historisch, philosophisch, religiös, ästhetisch den Kristallisationsbegriff liefert .. ." (389), gives a valuable impetus for further interdisciplinary, historical work on this important topic.

PRISCILLA HAYDEN-ROY  
University of Nebraska—Lincoln